

Ageism and the Deteriorating Role of Families towards the Aged in India

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ABSTRACT:

As the number keeps adding to the age, so as the struggles to live a dignified life also keeps adding. The paper explains how the aged people are facing hardships that threatens their rights and dignity in the current Indian Society. It will take into account the role of family in providing security to their ageing family members and how the event of global processes such as industrialisation and globalisation has impacted the structure of Indian society and its effect on the lives of the aged. The paper will thoroughly discuss the reasons for the unfavourable treatment towards the aged people and the government response to this issue.

KeyWords: Ageism, Old-age, Family care, Industrialisation, Modernisation, Media, Social Care, Health Care, Elderly Abuse

I. INTRODUCTION

In India there are nearly 103.9 million elderly people and about 8.5 per cent of the population are aged above 60 according to the 2016 report by the Ministry for Statistics and Programme Implementation, India. The aged population continues to grow by 3.5 per cent every year and it is expected that by 2050, the elderly population in India will be estimated around 325 million people or about 20% of the population as per the 2014 report by the HelpAge India, a non-profit organisation (Datta, 2018). But what is ageism and what it has to do with aged people? Ageism basically refers to the systematic or casual age-based discrimination of an individual or group. Robert Butler, an American Gerontologist used this term in 1969 to explain the practice of discrimination committed against aged people (Quadagno, 2008). When we come across an elderly person, the first thing that comes to our mind is that 'they are old and they cannot adapt to new developments' which implies the idea of 'othering' where usually the young ones separate themselves from the older people for not being energetic or competent enough. This entire idea leads to the process of ageism where the aged people are treated differently, often taking the form of discrimination and those who carry out the practice of ageism are called as ageist. Society begins to define their traits often associated with unfavourable terms such as vulnerable, incompetent, and incapable. Aging is an inevitable stage of life that no one can escape but unfortunately, the increasing negative approach towards them leads to the concern of their welfare in society.

II. CONTEMPORARY ATTITUDE OF FAMILY TOWARDS AGED IN INDIA

Indian society is well-known to revolve around traditional values and the importance of family where the behavioural norms and social values are passed on from generation to generation through socialization. Family

values such as respect, responsibility, love, loyalty towards the elders are supposed to be the pillar for the social infrastructure. Hence, we can presume that the aged members of the family will receive social support from their relatives. However, this seems to be not the case in recent years due to the following reasons.

- **Social Transition of Indian Society**

The process of *urbanization*, *industrialization*, and *globalization* has caused an erosion in the traditional values and institutions of Indian society. The legacy of joint family has slowly disintegrated and is dominantly converting into nuclear ones as the young people are migrating to different cities in search of better opportunities leaving their older parents behind with no young ones to look after them, only the aged people engaging among themselves. Furthermore, strong social norms that used to coerced the younger ones to take care of their elders are growing weak. As Indian society becomes more industrialized, individual values become more important than the relevance of family values. Therefore, elderly members become socially excluded as they start losing their influence due to being rendered as a weight (Cowgill & Holmes, 1972). Consequently, looking after the aged people are considered to be a voluntary job that can be overlooked without the fear of condemnation.

- **Interest of Exchange and Benefits**

Like most societies, Indian society also follows the pattern of capitalistic society which means that the idea of exchange, profit, and ownership has also crawled into the values of the people that can be seen in the familial relationships. Henceforth, as people grow older, they will become dependent on their younger kins and since relationships are based on mutual exchange, the ability to exchange resources especially the materialistic ones from aged people decreases (Dowd,1975). Therefore, for the aging people to maintain their active status in society, they must engage themselves in accumulating wealth for their offspring to inherit and involving in the social exchange system where the elderly takes care of their grandchildren.

In simple words, the aged people are bounded to a very cruel system of exchange to safeguard their social role which threatens to disappear due to their economic and physical unproductiveness in a society where they are compelled to provide their acquired materialistic assistance to their young ones so that in return they get emotional and physical support. Therefore, unable to perform any exchange with their offspring may result in being discarded or worst being abused.

- **Economic Status as a Social Safeguard**

According to a survey conducted by the 'All India Senior Citizen's Confederation (AISSCON)' shows that "60 percent of elderly people living with their families face abuse and harassment, 66 per cent are either 'very poor' or below the poverty line and 39 per cent have been either abandoned or live alone" in India (Datta, 2018). The

economic status of elderly people can heavily influence their social life and thus, financial conditions become important to preserve their social status to continue living a dignified life. But it is really difficult to maintain the financial status as people grow older, they become economically disengaged and no longer able to generate income due to retirement from the workforce. Moreover, the struggles of aged men and aged women are not the same especially in a society where a strong patriarchal system prevails. Aged women are more likely to struggle than their male counterparts due to the lack of any financial assets that can benefit their offspring. The chances are higher for aged women to be maltreated, abused or being abandoned by their children and the situation is gravest amongst the lower socio-economic groups.

- **Age Conformity Expectations**

As society is stratified by race, class, and gender in the same way age is also stratified because age acts as the base for different social control, people belonging to different age group do not have the same access to benefits and support which means that people from different age group have a variance of privileges on choices and actions (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Age to some extent act as a factor defining certain behaviours for that specific age group and going against the so-called behavioural norms might bring in criticisms for the defiant. For instance, elderly people are not expected to wear trendy fashion clothes that are popular among the young cohorts and if they do then they are claimed to be not acting according to their age which is formed from the cultural ideas of what is accepted and what is not accepted.

- **Lack of Adaptability**

Aged people are often scrutinized for their lack of adaptability to new ideas and inventions or for living the orthodox lifestyle. However, young people frequently used this to justify the redundancy of the aging population as they are not able to keep up with the pace of their fast-changing environment that mostly revolves around new technology trends. Consequently, they face social exclusion for being incapable to learn the new knowledge that the younger generations consider to be essential. Here, the problem is the ignorance of young people to understand that cognitive skills decline with age and that's why aged people take a longer time to learn new skills. The absence of understanding by the younger ones is a reason for the aged to feel incompetent that somehow alienates them further from society.

- **Culture of Ageism Through Media**

The growth of industrialisation and modernisation played a role in inflicting such a negative image of the older ones and especially in the age of social media, it has become a lot worse. As people are growing more connected to the TV and other digital forms of media, evidently people are developing the negative stereotype of the elderly of being unattractive, incompetent, and weak that needs support all the time (Chonody & Teater,

2018). It is also worthy to mention most of the 21st century advertisements that create a false reality in the minds of the young people that being old or having a similar outlook of an elder person is very closely correlated to traits such as being ugly, disgusting, and more other negative qualities and needs to be treated quickly. Apart from dictating the outer appearance, media also leaves a strong impression that determines the role of the elderly people. For instance, when one is old and weak what kind of contribution, they can provide to support their family and society. The expected roles that must be performed by the older people for the family are to take care of children especially in industrialised societies where there is a higher percentage of both working parents and has limited time to look after their children. So, they tend to take it as granted that it is the responsibility of the grandparents to look after their grandchildren when the parents are at work.

III. OVERALL IMPACT OF AGEISM IN THE SOCIETY

Ageism has become a very common act committed towards the elderly and it is very surprising that such a discriminatory act is deemed as something normal which is one of the responsible factors for driving the old people traits in a negative way. All these negative stereotyping is only a product of social construction that forms the act of ageism. As a result, it has a negative impact on the aged people which includes social as well as interpersonal issues. These issues range from employment and medical care to being neglected and abused. Such acts affect their overall health as they get stressed which in turns weakens their immune system and consequently, they develop an illness. It not only affects the older people but also the younger people, as they tend to stress over ageing and again creates a false barrier to reach that stage of life. The inability to accept that ageing is inevitable will create psychological harm and may develop a fear of ageing.

IV. GOVERNMENT POLICY REVIEWS

The Indian Government has enacted laws such as the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment to provide effective maintenance provision to all the senior citizens of India. Under this Act, the parents and the grandparents can seek maintenance support from their children if they are unable to maintain themselves from their current income. In case the children refuse to provide such maintenance, the Maintenance Tribunal can order monthly allowance from the children that do not exceed 10,000 INR. In addition, the National policy for Senior citizens 2011 ensures protection of the elderly people from domestic abuse and provide support to abandoned elder people as well as their housing, health and social care and financial security. Such laws should have protected the rights and dignity of the senior citizens but unfortunately many elderlies are not aware of such laws and this is a big concern. This particularly derives from the lack of promotion of such laws by the Indian government but also the inability of the senior citizens to access to the digital platforms where such information is available easily. Even though, these laws secure the

protection and support, it falls impotent unless the purpose to disseminate information for the aged to benefit has been achieved.

IV. Conclusion

Senior citizens are stripped of their social roles and status due to their inability to participate in the activities of wider society, therefore their problems and issues are often not recognized and this creates a great hurdle for elderly people to live happily. With present Indian society being characterized by nuclear families which has played a major role for children to disown their parents. The parents are not able to get along with the present life style of their young generation, they are not considered or recognized and become insignificant persons and feel insecure. The aged people need to make essential decisions that align with their existing skills before they retire or become redundant so that they can continue to be productive to the society and maintain their relationships and societal role. The government also needs to focus on the protection of the elderly rights for them in order to live a safe and dignified life free from abuse and insecurities.

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